

The Great Chiefs

Cochise: Warrior and Statesman



COCHISE BY WILLIAM S. SUTTON, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, CHARLES PARKER.

This portrait by William S. Sutton—labeled “Cochise, 1872”—was discovered in 1997 by gallery owner Charles V. Parker. The assumption is that Sutton painted from a photograph or rude sketch which was later lost. While not proven, Cochise historian Edwin R. Sweeney maintains that it is probably a true representation of the great chief.

Early on a cold winter morning in 1861, a young man, Felix Ward, just barely a teenager, stole out of a ranch house in Arizona’s Sonoita Valley. He had reason to flee. Born to a Mexican mother and, it was rumored, an Apache father, he had few friends among his white neighbors. Worse, his stepfather, an Irish immigrant named John Ward, was regularly drunk—and when he was drunk, he was in the habit of beating the young man with fists or whatever came to hand.

When Ward noticed his stepson was gone, he rode north to Fort Buchanan, where he complained that Chiricahua Apaches had stolen the

boy and some of his prized cattle. The Apaches, he added, rode with the war leader the Apaches called *Cheis*, “Oak Tree,” in honor of his strength and endurance.

It took time—nearly three months—for the cavalry to mount an expedition to find the supposed kidnappers, but eventually 60 men headed out into the rough country between the Peloncillo and Chiricahua mountain ranges, where they believed they would find their quarry. They were right; for while Cochise, as the white newcomers called him, ranged across a vast territory, he spent most of his time in the rocky fastness of the

Chiricahua and Dos Cabezas mountains of what is now southeastern Arizona. Close to the main wagon road leading from El Paso to Tucson, commanding a broad view of the San Simon Valley, the mountains afforded a fine defense, and only a foolhardy stranger dared venture far into them.

THE BASCOM AFFAIR

Still, the Butterfield stage line kept a corral nearby, at a place called Apache Pass, and it was there that the cavalrymen went, making camp on the flats below. Their commander, a young lieutenant named George Bascom, waited patiently,

and soon Cochise and several members of his family—including his wife, two of his children and his brother—came down to pay their respects.

That Cochise should have been trusting may seem surprising, given the bad relations that had often ensued between Indians and whites in Arizona. But Cochise had befriended the men of the Butterfield station, even supplying them with firewood in winter. So far as Cochise was concerned, his real enemies were farther south, in Mexico, whose government had long paid a bounty for Apache scalps.

Cochise was thus surprised when Bascom, having invited him into his tent, accused him of stealing John Ward’s son and cattle. Cochise protested his innocence, but Bascom—egged on by Ward himself—replied that he would hold Cochise’s relatives prisoner until the boy was delivered.

At that, eyewitnesses tell us, Cochise sprang up, produced a hidden knife, slashed through the tent, and fled. The soldiers fired some 50 shots at him, and one of them found his leg. Yet Cochise soon reached the surrounding hills, still clutching the cup of coffee that Bascom had served him, and waited, occasionally appearing just out of range to call for the release of his family.

So it went for two weeks. Then, tired of waiting, Cochise and 100 warriors appeared at the Butterfield station, chased away the soldiers’ mules, and fired a few choice shots at Bascom and his troops. The soldiers returned fire, killing a Butterfield employee, and then hunkered down

as Bascom sent for help. It arrived some days later in the form of another 70 soldiers from Fort Buchanan. The ranking officer, Bascom's superior, was angry that Cochise had escaped and that his warriors had taken hostages themselves, one of whom Cochise ordered to write a note to Bascom. "Treat my people well," it read, "and I will do the same by yours."

Instead, the soldiers hanged Cochise's brother and two of his brother's sons. Bascom released Cochise's wife and sons, however, and then took time to write an official report on what would come to be called the "Bascom Affair," in which he claimed that he had released Cochise on his own recognition after the great chief promised that he would return Felix Ward to his family. The report had the desired effect: Cochise's name became widely known, synonymous with treachery, while Bascom received a promotion to captain. Three years later, he died in a Civil War battle.

HIS RISE TO PROMINENCE

Cochise had come to prominence years before. Born in about 1805, he earned his reputation among his people by fighting valiantly against Mexican forces throughout the 1830s and 1840s. He rose to leadership among the Chiricahua Apaches during a long campaign in Sonora, Mexico, first as a war leader under the command of the famed Chiricahua fighter Narbona, and then, after Narbona's death in about 1856, as head of a Chiricahua alliance that incorporated bands from as far away as what is now central New Mexico.

He was famous among his people, though few outsiders had seen him up close. Now, with his family's blood to avenge, he became a force to contend with, and well known far beyond the Southwest. Cochise

vowed to drive whites and Mexicans alike from the Apache homelands and beyond, and he waged a war that threatened to depopulate southern Arizona and New Mexico as far east as the Rio Grande Valley. That conflict, which lasted for 10 years, unified Apache groups that had previously kept their distance from one another, and together they fought a steady guerrilla campaign, focusing on lone travelers and isolated ranches and farms, against which the Americans relied on treachery as much as on superior arms.

One of the most infamous episodes of the Indian wars, in fact, involved Mangas Coloradas, whose daughter, Dostehseh, was Cochise's second wife and the mother of his sons Taza and Naiche. In January 1863, government agents lured Mangas Coloradas to Pinos Altos, New Mexico, for a supposed peace parley; the U.S. Congress had authorized the creation of an Apache reservation at the headwaters of the Gila, they said, assuring the Apache chief that they wanted to discuss how his people could be relocated there. When Mangas Coloradas appeared in their camp, American soldiers seized him and, that night, killed him. They sent the skull east, where it remains.

Cochise's campaign intensified. Untold numbers, perhaps in the hundreds, of the Apaches' enemies

died. The great leader was a seldom-seen presence on the land, and he spent most of the time between 1865 and 1868 high in the Sierra Madre of Mexico, far from even the remotest ranch. Even when he was



COURTESY OF FRISCO NATIVE AMERICAN MUSEUM AND NATURAL HISTORY CENTER

close to home—near Apache Pass and the natural citadel in the Dragoon Mountains to the west called, to this day, Cochise Stronghold—he was all but invisible.

He was also tired of fighting, as his words, as reported by Tom Jeffords, suggest:

ABOVE: Naiche or Na-Chise, Cochise's younger son, was said to look much like his famous father.



RB Burnham & Co. NATIVE AUCTIONS

Auctioneers

Bruce Burnham & Hank Blair
Specializing in Native American Art
And Western Antiquities

~Consignment, Appraisal, and Estate~

Coming Native American Art Auctions:

Friday-Sunday, January 13-16
Native American Art Show/Expo
Tucson Convention Center

Saturday, May 6th
Native American Art Auction
Hubbell Trading Post, Ganado, AZ
Preview 9-11, Auction at noon

Saturday, May 20th
Native American Art Auction
Autry National/Southwest Museum
Los Angeles, CA
Call for times

Sunday, May 28th
Native American Art Auction
Pagosa Springs Fiber Arts Festival
Pagosa Springs Fair Grounds
Pagosa Springs, CO
Call for times

10% Buyers Premium applicable to all auctions
Never a registration fee

For more information on any of these auctions,
please contact the organization sponsoring the
event or RB Burnham & Co. Trading Post.

RB Burnham & Co. Trading Post
Fine Navajo Weavings
High quality Baskets, Jewelry,
Weaving yarn & and more.
Hwy. 191 - Sanders, AZ.
(928) 688-2777

Mention this ad when you visit the trading post
and receive a free Navajo Rug Poster

*Your Direct Source to Quality,
Authentic Native Art*

"My people have killed Americans and Mexicans and taken their property. Their losses have been greater than mine. I have killed ten white men for every Indian slain, but I know that the whites are many and the Indians are few. Apaches are growing less every day. Why is it that the Apaches wait to die? They roam over the hills and plains and want the heavens to fall on them. The Apaches were once a great nation; they are now but few, and because of this they want to die and so carry their lives on their fingernails."

NEGOTIATING A PEACE

The white soldiers arrayed against him, who had gone through several generals during the years the war had raged, were tired too. A new general was now in pursuit, a man named George Crook, whose natural inclination was to strike at his enemy until total victory was achieved. But Crook's commander-in-chief, a former general named Ulysses S. Grant, had different ideas, and he sent agents westward to explore the prospect of creating reservations that would be more than dumping grounds on land that no one else wanted.

And so, quietly, talks began. One of those agents, Tom Jeffords, an Arizona settler who had learned something of the Apache language and had evident respect for the culture, met with Cochise several times, hoping to convince the war leader to give up his fight before more died on either side. Jeffords persisted, and with him other Americans whom Cochise graciously accepted at his fire. The years went by. In 1873, one visitor, an Army officer named John Gregory Bourke, described Cochise as looking 50 years of age when he was in truth 65 or older, "six feet in stature, deep chested, roman nosed, black eyes, firm mouth, a kindly and even somewhat melancholy expression tempering the determined look of his countenance...his manners were very gentle."

He was also quite ill, and he knew that time was against both him and his people. Witnessing the forced confinement of other Apache groups on reservations far from their mountain homes, he remarked, "Nobody wants peace more than I do. Why shut me up on a reservation? We will make peace; we will keep it faithfully. But let us go around free as Americans do. Let us go wherever we please."

But the government was not inclined in those days to consider the Apaches as free

Americans. The roundups continued, causing Bourke to remark later, "It was an outrageous proceeding, one for which I should still blush had I not long since gotten over blushing at anything the United States Government did in Indian matters."

THE END OF THE TRAIL

By that time, Cochise was dying, felled by an illness called dyspepsia in its day—probably stomach cancer. He slipped away on June 8, 1874, having had a final conversation with Jeffords, whom he regarded as a friend, the night before. His warriors took his body deep into the Dragoon Mountains, lowered it into a crevice, far from prying eyes, and then rode their horses back and forth to destroy the trail leading up to the site. They then mourned their fallen leader for four days, sending up a cry of lamentation that spread across the broad desert valleys and echoed along the mountains. "The howl that went up from these people was fearful to listen to," said Jeffords, who knew of the location of the grave but never revealed it, though he was often pressured to do so. "They were scattered around in the nooks and ravines in parties, and as the howling from one rancheria would lag, it would be renewed with vigor in another."

The earth holds Cochise now, but he is remembered today—and surely with more respect than among the many who heard his name in days past and trembled.

And as for young Felix Ward? Soon after leaving home, the runaway was taken in by Pinaleno Apaches, then adopted by a White Mountain Apache family. When he was 25, calling himself Mickey Free, he enlisted in the Apache scouts attached to General Crook's command and soon was at work fighting the Chiricahuas. That war would last a decade beyond Cochise's death, with one of his lieutenants, a man named Goyahkla, leading the Chiricahuas in battle. He is better known to history by the name his Mexican enemies gave him: Geronimo

Gregory McNamee is the author of Gila: The Life and Death of an American River and other books of history and natural history. A longtime resident of Tucson, he writes for The Book Standard, The Hollywood Reporter, Encyclopaedia Britannica and many other publications.

A vertical yellow bar with a red diamond at the top, located on the left side of the page.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: The Great Chiefs: Cochise: Warrior and Statesman
SOURCE: Native Peoples 19 no1 Ja/F 2006
WN: 0600101541015

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.nativepeoples.com/>

Copyright 1982-2006 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.